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ICM Reflections – Some Money Talk...



As we move along in the Fall Season of the Church Year, stewardship is a normal topic of conversation at all levels of the Church. Many local congregations face growing pressures as their numbers diminish (with a concomitant loss of older members

who often have a history of higher giving patterns); buildings age and need ongoing maintenance and/or even massive remodeling; utilities keep rising and so, too, do expensive items like building, casualty, and health insurance.

As I experience life with the SECUCC, I see such trends, and I want to assure you that you are not alone! The same patterns are occurring throughout the Protestant world, and the trickle down impact is significant for the Conferences and for the National UCC.

As I see it, the SECUCC faces a significant challenge in building its 2014 budget ... unless our 50+ congregations come through with surprises in Our Churches Wider Mission (OCWM) giving in these closing months of 2013. And at the National level of the UCC, the Collegium has just informed its staff of some 140+ that it will be necessary to trim \$2 million from the 2014 budget. This is grim, because already over the past decade the National UCC has cut its staff by about 50%. Now more cuts in staff (and very likely even some programs) will be necessary. This severe impact has been caused by two different causes hitting at the same time: shrinking OCWM (at the national level a drop from what used to be over \$12 million/year to now a total of \$6 million) AND big losses in endowed funds from the recent recession.

I do understand that churches need to be maintained and kept up to date ... and that doing so costs much more than used to be the case. We have a number of congregations here in the SECUCC that have done major work on their church buildings in recent times, and some of these have been intentional about building a tithe to the Conference capital campaign into their respective capital funding plans. I applaud all who have done so, and it should be a big boost the Conference for the future. At the same time, I urge all who are able to think in similar terms about their OCWM giving for the future. In particular I lift up one of our newest congregations, Holy Trinity in Nashville (which will be celebrating the dedication of their new sanctuary on November 17, 2013) – not only did Holy Trinity plan a substantial gift to the Conference capital campaign, but they also tithe to OCWM on a monthly basis: 10% of whatever comes in as church income each month gets sent to the Conference office as OCWM! This supports the Conference and enables us to send on a tithe to the National UCC.

As I travel around the Conference I look for such stories. I also look for stories of churches addressing issues presented by their buildings. I know that in many instances, the cost of such repairs are so daunting that there is no room for tithing above that cost. One such instance is faced by First Congregational UCC in Savannah where a roof that has been leaking for some time (a metal roof placed on the sanctuary when it was built twelve decades ago) now needs to be torn off and replaced – a huge expense for a small congregation. A similar story is true in Huntsville where the United Church there is in the midst of a large upgrade of a number of items needing repair and replacement: heating and cooling system parts, roofing, siding, parking lot resurfacing, and a long laundry lists of a number of other items that need attention. Both Savannah and Huntsville should be in good shape when these matters have been addressed, and we need to hold them in our thoughts and prayers as they take these important steps.

I do know the difference between preaching and meddling, so my stewardship message should be read as preaching: typical fall stewardship emphasis. If I wanted to go further and meddle then I would begin to argue (as some do these days) that perhaps we should give up our

buildings and go back to living as house church groups. I do think there is a place for the latter (maybe even the future of most new church growth), but I also value our larger spaces – where our folk can gather and program in ways that meet their own needs and at the same time serve as public space for all kinds of groups that need a place to meet (A.A., study groups, scouts, etc.) I also believe that the churches still have a vital role to play as sites for building up the arts, and so there is a defensible argument for instruments, aesthetic spaces, etc.

Finally, I am interested in helping local congregations meet their needs, and among the important tools I like to mention are these programs of the National UCC: the Cornerstone Fund for investment and for loans for local church building needs; the Local Church Building and Loan Fund for new and renewing congregations; United Church Funds for investment of local church dollars; and the UCC Insurance Board for property and casualty insurance. If you have any questions about any of these, do feel free to call me!

And may God bless all of your houses of worship – may they be places that meet your needs and feed your souls as you gather to praise God!

– Shalom, Randy

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michaeltstroud@bellsouth.net

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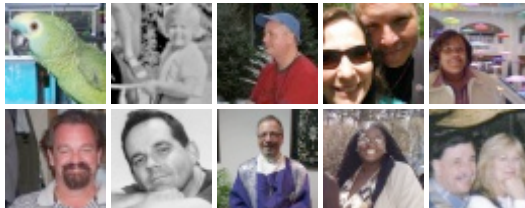
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